Talking Points from

DPI/NGO CONFERENCE 1994

WE THE PEOPLES: BUILDING PEACE

Indispensable collaboration

"Peace is too important to entrust to States alone . . . Non-governmental organizations are now considered full participants in international life."

—Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Secretary-General of the United Nations, opening address, 47th DPI/NGO Conference, 20-22 September 1994

In a determined and collaborative quest for world peace, more than 1,400 NGO, government and UN representatives met from 20 to 22 September 1994 at the United Nations, New York, to enhance their joint efforts in carrying out Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's "An Agenda for Peace: Preventive Diplomacy, Peacemaking and Peace-keeping". Addressing this partnership, Conference participants reviewed successes and shortcomings, identified new areas of cooperation and focused on preventive and proactive interventions.

Conference participants agreed that military peace-keeping is only an interim measure that freezes a conflict into a state of cease-fire. The creation and maintenance of permanent global peace require that the United Nations and NGOs focus on human rights and sustainable development with full participation of the people whose lives are at stake.

SINCE THE UN CHARTER

Brave new world?

The world has been transformed dramatically since the Charter of the United Nations was written in 1946. Who then could have imagined the end of the cold war, the fall of the Soviet system or a fourfold increase of UN Member States? Who then could have foreseen that internal, national or ethnic conflicts would become so numerous as to endanger world peace? Conference participants pondered the probability that their new world had outgrown the UN Charter which, intended to combat international discord, might no longer be adequate to address the peace-keeping and peace-building needs of complex internal conditions.

For the four decades of the cold war, the job of the United Nations, although difficult, was clear. A global balance of power was maintained, based on sharply divided alliances, easily identifiable enemies and common goals. Today, internal tensions held dormant by over 40 years of East-West super-Power rivalry have erupted, blurring national boundaries, stimulating an arms race among many smaller nations and exacerbating the spread of poverty, disease and violence. With the end of the cold war, certain regions have lost their strategic appeal, and have been left to sink into political disorder and economic underdevelopment.

Africa, in particular, the current site of 17 peace-keeping missions, suffers from "divide and rule" values and vestiges of colonialism. In other regions, sustained development and true peace are undermined by tribal conflict, religious intolerance and the plundering of national resources masked as economic growth. As a result, during the seven years between 1987 and 1994, the United Nations has been involved in 34 peace-keeping, peacemaking and peace-building missions—a sobering increase from just half that number during the preceding 40 years.

NEW ROLE FOR THE UN

Timely action with lasting impact

This vastly changed world calls for updated definitions of peace and the role of the United Nations in peace-keeping and peacemaking. These new definitions will materialize only when there is a shift from military preparedness to peace preparedness that is based on a human-centred concept of security.

How, speakers asked, can the United Nations engage in consistent peace-keeping if every conflict demands a case-by-case resolution? Collective security to help ensure world order would require a permanent UN standing force able to react quickly, independently and authoritatively. The Security Council needs to establish new guidelines that enable the UN to respond in a manner that is both timely and effective.

How can the United Nations cope with the huge toll of human disasters if it must repeatedly seek funds for emergency supplies? An aggressive pursuit of resources is essential to support far-sighted peace-keeping operations with lasting impact. Towards that end, the issue of timely payment of UN dues by Member States was raised throughout the Conference.

NEW ROLE FOR NGOs

Catalysts for change

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

—Margaret Mead, anthropologist

Since 1946, the United Nations has expanded from a forum exclusively available to sovereign States to an arena that involves full participation of NGOs. The myriad of complex post-cold-war responsibilities of the UN has created new avenues for NGO participation at every stage of peacemaking and peace-building. The UN depends on NGOs in crisis situations because NGOs are already on-site before the UN arrives and remain after the UN leaves. By virtue of their mobility and capacity to respond quickly, NGOs help prevent arising crises by providing early warnings from the field. In the field, Governments and the UN consult with NGOs on security assessments, evacuations, elections and the rebuilding of infrastructure.

NGOs are major catalysts for change. As advocates who build consensus from the bottom up, they mobilize public opinion and translate policy and theory into concrete actions. As key links in a chain of integrated actions, NGOs can influence Governments to commit people and resources to a secure and stable world peace.

World events are now experienced with immediacy across thousands of miles. An international journalist urged NGOs to use the media to translate their lofty philosophies and broad goals into specific images and personal stories of action that would move people's hearts and minds to the cause of peace.

NGOs increase their effectiveness when they coordinate their efforts to monitor human rights, deliver humanitarian aid and implement educational programmes and health campaigns. Saddened by the deaths from land-mines of UN peace-keepers and humanitarian assistance workers, some Conference participants urged that NGOs unite to call for the immediate abolition of the production and sale of these devastating weapons.

Independence and interdependence

While speakers from all sectors supported a broader role for NGOs in peacemaking and peace-building, they also acknowledged the long-standing conflicts that have marked the uneven relationship between NGOs, the UN system and Governments. NGOs and the United Nations avoid misunderstandings when they cooperate and complement each other's work. Collaborations between NGOs and Governments are most beneficial when States encourage maximum participation of NGOs, and NGOs honour political complexities of peace-keeping operations. NGOs must neither interfere with diplomatic roles of States nor allow themselves to be manipulated by States. NGO participants, cognizant of their increasing numbers and tangible successes, cautioned themselves not to become distanced from the people they represent.

HUMAN RIGHTS ARE THE BEDROCK OF PEACE

"The darkest place in hell is reserved for those who in a period of crisis, claim neutrality."

—Dante Alighieri, poet

Keeping the peace may mean rocking the boat

Human rights abuses lie at the heart of every humanitarian crisis. When NGOs and the United Nations remain silent witnesses to human rights abuses, their silence is deadly. An absence of commitment to human rights leads to violence; a collapse of sacred values leads to chaos. Where humanitarian laws are trampled, where justice is traded in for a sick and fragile peace, where blatant genocide is dismissed as tribal conflict, ethnic cleansing grounds and killing fields shred the fabric of tomorrow's peace.

Since most current conflicts are ethnic, civil and tribal, and involve secessions and partitions, NGOs that provide humanitarian assistance face a dilemma. On the one hand, NGOs are required to respect sovereignty, remain neutral and refrain from negotiating or taking sides between conflicting parties. On the other hand, NGOs have a humanitarian mandate to intervene, and such action on behalf of peace does not permit neutrality.

One medical NGO, it was pointed out, was praised for humanitarian healing during emergency relief work. But when the same organization spoke out to prevent a future blood bath, it was accused of interfering in politics.

The independent conscience and the independent voice are keys to tomorrow's peace. Whenever and wherever rights are denied, NGOs have the responsibility to speak up as the United Nations cannot. NGOs must not be passive out of fear of criticism from States who may see them as "taking sides" or "meddling".

Ensuring the rights of women . . .

Violence against women hinders their capacity to pursue a wide range of options to which they are entitled, thus depriving society as well as women of their contributions to development, international peace and security.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women represent quantum leaps in the human rights agenda and triumphs for NGOs. For the first time, the international community took steps to ensure that all human rights would be viewed as universal and interdependent, and that women's rights would remain on the international agenda as human rights.

. . . and children

NGOs have been instrumental in building a movement to secure the rights of children which are enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. NGOs serve as watchdogs and report violations of the Convention by providing their own reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. Stronger national and regional coalitions of NGOs are needed to promote, advocate and educate about children's rights, and to mobilize Governments to develop policies and implement practices consistent with their pledged commitments to the Convention.

RESPONDING TO THE SILENT EMERGENCIES

The world cannot wait for CNN

In a world of constant upheaval, stories vie for headlines and attention spans shrink. As the volume of information grows, compassion must remain vital and not be permitted to die from exhaustion.

NGOs must respond to "silent" emergencies, which are far greater in number than the "loud" crises that are usually covered by international news agencies. While UN security is present in over 60 of the 184 Member States, disasters other than armed conflict currently affect 200 million to 300 million people. In all conflicts and disasters, the best intervention is prevention. Since 1950, when the world's population was only half that of today, preventive measures have reduced by 100 per cent the number of children under five who die annually from measles, diarrhoea and malaria.

HIV infection, in its early stages, is an invisible

disaster as much in need of immediate response as war or drought. The largest infected population worldwide are married women who contract the virus from their husbands' intravenous drug use or sexual contacts with multiple partners. All people are touched by HIV/AIDS—those infected, their families, friends and co-workers, medical and social service providers and people who must provide financial and social resources. A successful response to this epidemic will arise only when every world citizen becomes engaged as an agent for change. NGOs can take leading roles by building social awareness and launching productive action to meet this great challenge.

DEVELOPMENT IS ANOTHER NAME FOR PEACE

Only a world free of want can be a world at peace

Without peace, there can be no development. Without development that is equitable and sustainable, there can be no lasting peace. Post-conflict recovery requires shifts from military to civilian action, and from relief to rehabilitation. The continuation of disproportionately high military budgets and costly structural adjustment programmes have pushed the social obligations of States into third place. Forty-three countries spend more on their military activities than on the education of their children.

Conference participants agreed that development must be human-centred and involve the full, free participation of all men and women in making decisions that affect all aspects of their lives. Peace is built by tackling the root causes of conflict—poverty and inequality which result in malnutrition, illiteracy and unemployment. Peace is built by creating, protecting and inculcating respect for a safe and sustainable environment that is equally shared by all citizens of the world.

The empowerment of women is critical to long-term peace

Despite new policies, stronger laws and successful programmes, women are still the majority of the world's poor and have little access to resources. Of the 960 million people globally who are illiterate, two thirds are women. Of the 113 million children who are not enrolled in primary school, 70 per cent are girls. Representing half the world's population, women, on the average, earn only one tenth of its income while supporting 30 per cent of its households. Women's unpaid work, including child-rearing, food production and fire-tending, fuels many national economies.

Women suffer most from war and experience first-hand the effects of drugs and violence in their homes and on the streets. While women work hard for the cause of peace, official peacemaking is usually left to generals and male politicians. Participants called for access of women to pivotal roles, where they function as architects and decision makers, not only in support functions.

MAKING PEACE IS BUILDING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

No quick fix

The building of democratic institutions and the strengthening of civil society involve separating civil police from military, reforming legal systems, developing impartial judicial systems and implementing fair elections. NGOs help build respect for democracy by spreading ideas of peace, educating about principles of democracy, participating in the birth and development of democratic institutions and serving as vigilant monitors of these processes.

The implementation of peace is the responsibility not of a single nation, but of the entire union of nations. Only with such a unified and long-term commitment to peace and to the principles on which international humanitarian laws are based can military cease-fires be sustained and the United Nations protect and support the development of the world's people.

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Produced by the United Nations Department of Public Information
DPI/1704—95 19994—August 1995—4M